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Life Star is vital medical link, Democrats say

Backus chopper faces funding cuts; Rell calls on hospitals to find solution

By James Mosher

Eastern Connecticut's rural nature and the emerging summer, with its expected rise in vehicle accidents, are two reasons state government should continue to fund the Life Star medical helicopter program, General Assembly Democrats said Tuesday.

Senate President Donald Williams, D-Brooklyn, was joined by six others from the Legislature's majority party at a press conference in the hangar of The William W. Backus Hospital in Norwich. Backus is home to one of two Life Star helicopters. Hartford Hospital, which administers the program, houses the other.

"There is no doubt that Life Star saves lives," Williams said. "This is an example of a service that keeps our communities and families safe."

The legislators object to plans by Gov. M. Jodi Rell to eliminate \$1.39 million in annual subsidies. The program's total budget is \$7 million.

Rell's office cited Connecticut's growing budget deficit, projected to widen to as much as \$8.7 billion in the next two fiscal years, and called on hospitals to find a solution.

"This was a difficult cut to make, but this is an extraordinarily difficult economic environment," Jeffrey Beckham, undersecretary of legislative affairs in the Office of Policy and Management, which handles budget matters for the governor, wrote in an e-mail. "The hospital is a for-profit enterprise that can make some internal efficiencies and reallocate its resources, just as the state is having to do."

In fact, Backus and Hartford hospitals are not for profit.

Backus administrators and rescue workers fear their helicopter, which celebrated its 10th birthday April 4, could be grounded part of the year or retired completely if the subsidies are eliminated. Hartford Hospital hasn't said what will be done if the reduction is finalized. Both airships may be affected, Williams said Tuesday.

The helicopter has become a political football, as Democratic lawmakers and the Republican governor position themselves after failing to settle on a budget during the session that ended last week. The budget is being debated in a special session that began immediately after the regular one ended at midnight June 3.

Sen. Edith Prague, D-Columbia, whose district includes Backus, called Rell's pulling of the subsidies "very surprising" and "not a good decision."

"Getting those funds restored is at the top of my agenda," Prague said, wearing a Life Star pin on her lapel.

Dr. David Coletti, medical director of Backus' trauma program, spoke from the podium with the legislators, calling Life Star a "major player" in treating trauma victims.

"It is crucial to saving lives in Eastern Connecticut, Rhode Island and beyond," he said.

The Backus helicopter is Eastern Connecticut's link to renowned medical expertise such as Yale-New Haven Hospital's cardiac unit and Bridgeport Hospital's burn center, state Rep. Kevin Ryan, D-Montville, said.

The legislators called for savings in other areas, with Prague suggesting consolidating state colleges. Backed by a sign that said "Protecting Connecticut with real cuts, smart investments," Williams said he wants a more healthy balance.

"We all agree that we need to make cuts to help solve the budget deficit, but they can't be reckless cuts that will jeopardize the health and safety of our families," he said.